RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Wave Analogy of Feminist Movement:
A Comparative Analysis of Western and Indian Feminism

Adwitiya Gope
Associate Professor,Tripura Institute of Technology,adwitiya10@rediffmail.com

Abstract

The feminist movement, both in the West and in India, has evolved in phases, often described through the wave analogy. This article explores the wave phenomenon of feminism, analyzing how it emerged and unfolded in the West and comparing it to the trajectory of feminist movements in India. The wave analogy helps us understand the shifting tides of feminist activism, the responses to socio-political contexts, and the convergence and divergence between Western and Indian feminist narratives. By examining the historical context and impact of each wave in both regions, the paper aims to highlight the unique and shared experiences that have shaped the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

Key words: Feminism, India, narrative, gender equality

Introduction

The feminist movement has been one of the most influential and transformative social movements in history, seeking gender equality and the dismantling of patriarchal structures. Over time, the movement has been characterized by distinct phases, often referred to as "waves." These waves reflect shifts in ideology, strategy, and focus (Kinser 124). The wave analogy has been used to understand the progression of feminist movements, particularly in Western contexts, but its applicability in non-Western countries, such as India, has also been a subject of significant discussion (Sangari and Vaid).

The Wave Phenomenon of Western Feminism

First Wave Feminism (19th to Early 20th Century)

The first wave feminism spanned from 1848 to 1920 and began under the leadership of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. It aimed at political suffrage of women. The wave was primarily concerned with legal inequalities—such as the right to vote, own property, and access education—mostly for white middle- and upper-class women (Sangari and Vaid). It achieved milestones like the 19th Amendment in the U.S., which granted women the right to vote.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Second Wave Feminism (1960s–1980s)

Coined by Marsha Lear and often associated with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, the second wave focused on reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, and gender roles (Kinser 129). This wave was influenced by movements like the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War protests. Notable figures include Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, and bell hooks, with organizations like NOW pushing for policy reforms (hooks). Roe v. Wade (1973) became a landmark moment for reproductive freedom (Garrison).

Third Wave Feminism (1990s–Present)

The third wave emerged in the 1990s, addressing the failures of earlier waves to represent marginalized voices, including women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and working-class women. Key thinkers such as Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1241), while Judith Butler challenged traditional notions of gender identity (Butler). This era also saw activism through digital platforms and social media (Garrison).

Wave Phenomenon of Indian Feminism

In India, the first feminist wave can be traced to 19th-century social reform movements led by Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who fought against sati and child marriage and promoted women's education (Sagari and Vaid). These reformist movements, along with Gandhian activism, laid the groundwork for Indian feminism.

Second Wave Feminism in India

Inspired by global feminist movements, Indian second-wave feminism began in the 1970s. It focused on gender roles, economic disparities, and patriarchal oppression (Peet 248). Movements challenged the notion that gender roles are biologically determined and highlighted them as social constructs reinforced by Indian patriarchy (Sangari and Vaid).

Third Wave Feminism in India

This wave began in the 1980s and reflects the impact of globalization, education, and state policy changes. Government initiatives like the *Towards Equality* report and national policies for women's development helped shift gender dynamics (Government of India). Third-wave feminism in India emphasizes "new femininities" and "girl power" within the framework of postmodernism and neoliberalism (Garrison).

With increased access to education and jobs, Indian women began redefining their traditional roles. Movements like SEWA and the implementation of gender-sensitive policies led to greater visibility of women's issues (Self Employed Women's Association). Recent decades have seen growing activism around sexual violence, led by protests like the 2012 Nirbhaya movement and campaigns like #MeToo (MeToo India; Women and Child Development Ministry).

In India, any movement that for the first time addressed women's issues in general and / or brought women folk in the forefront was obviously the social reform movements of the nineteenth century India as promulgated by reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and others, which was followed by India's Nationalist movement. Therefore, first wave feminism in Indian

RESEARCH ARTICLE

context can be referred to the mid – nineteenth century social reformist movement paired with early nineteenth century Gandhian philosophy dissolving social prejudices and empowering women using their socio – economic status. The objective of the first wave was the upliftment of the status of women in the society.

The second wave movement that started in the 1960s radically addressed the issues of women's rights in capitalist societies as a result of the anti-Vietnam war movement and civil rights campaign: "The second wave of feminism began with the radicalization of women during the anti-Vietnam-war and civil rights movements of the 1960s" (Peet 248). In varied parts of South Asia, including India, this second wave movement appeared with its vividness. This wave of feminism discussed dichotomy existing as defined gender roles between male and females. Such debates concluded that these were socially constructed stereotypes rather than biologically determined. Indian society maintains distinct sex roles for boys and girls. With minor exceptions, the family structure as well as the society of India is by and large patriarchal or patrilocal. Hence, in a patriarchal society men are placed in a more advantageous position than women. This is reflective of psychologically focused theory of gender. Much the same is the case of sex roles for men and women in India, but these roles are considerably more complicated because of the ingrained, patriarchal, dominant socio-cultural attitudes and discourses. This claim about how femininity is socially constructed quickly became dominant in 'Second Wave feminism', offering a way to distinguish between sex and gender that is now widely accepted in feminist theory.

Third Wave feminism is considered as an ideology, a movement or the "newest recognisable phase of feminist thought" (Garrison 37), which is an offshoot of Second Wave feminism, yet differentiated by some cultural and political ideologies. Third Wave feminism and postfeminist discourses concentrate on the notion of multiplicity of femininities under the heading of 'new femininities' and 'girl power'.

In the third phase of women's movement, the independent state India initiated different measures to empower women. As a result, initiatives were started to be taken up to enhance advancement, development and empowerment of women by the Government of India.[1] Since independence, different initiatives taken at the national level like separate provisions for development of women through series of five year plans, Towards Equality Report[2], the National Policies on Education and some other such policies contributed greatly to improve the literacy rate among Indian women. Undeniably education played a significant role in the empowerment of Indian women. Nonetheless,

---

[1]Details is published in National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001, India (http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/skills/hrdr/init/ind_2.htm, March, 27, 2007) and Towards Partnership Between Men and Women in Politics, New Delhi, 14-18 February 1997.

[2] This report was prepared by the Committee on Status of Women in India, appointed by the Government of India at the initiation of the United Nations. The report painted a bleak picture of women's disadvantaged condition in the Indian society.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

educated Indian women were gradually advancing towards employment trajectories thereby proving education and employment (career) to be the major two key arenas of empowerment of women in India. As education ignited the minds of Indian women to develop aspirations to become career women, Indian women's increased appearance in the space outside the home demanded a change, a shift in the traditional roles of mother, daughter and wife perennially being played by women since ages. It is in this context of change of women's roles driven by the changes equally happening in the national economic scenario, that the analysis of principles espoused by the third wave feminism becomes pertinent.

Third Wave Feminism in India

The latest wave phenomenon of feminism is termed as third wave which marks its beginningfrom 1980s and continues till date. Third wave feminism denotes a shift in the gender roles due to the changes in the political and cultural spheres enabled by the changes happening due to economic globalization. This section studies the context of economic globalization and the ideology of postmodernism and their effect in the changing status of Indian women.

With the modernization of the post - independence India, women who are educated started exploring employment opportunities. Women with their increasing presence in the public sphere place themselves at the cutting – edge of the challenge to shift in gender roles. Changes in the traditional gender roles give rise to a phenomenon of 'new femininities'. Emerging trend of 'new femininities' is considered as a significant principle of third wave feminism.

Pre-Independence and Post-Independence Feminism in India

Pre-independence feminism included the efforts of reformers and early women's organizations like the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), focusing largely on upper-caste women's issues (Sangari and Vaid).

After 1947, legal reforms like the Hindu Marriage Act (1955) and Dowry Prohibition Act (1961) were passed. However, feminist concerns were often seen as secondary to national development goals (Sangari and Vaid).

The Women's Liberation Movement (1970s–1980s)

This period marked the rise of feminist organizations like SEWA and NFIW, which addressed issues such as dowry, rape, and domestic violence. Activists such as Kamla Bhasin and Sharmila Rege emphasized intersectionality and grassroots mobilization (Sangari and Vaid).

Contemporary Feminism (1990s–Present)

Contemporary feminism in India emphasizes workplace rights, sexual harassment laws, and bodily autonomy. Digital media has amplified voices that were previously marginalized, and movements like #MeToo India have redefined the feminist space (MeToo India).

Comparative Analysis: Western Versus Indian Feminism

While Western feminism is largely defined by linear waves responding to legal and societal changes, Indian feminism is far more complex, shaped by caste, class, colonial legacies, and religion (Sangari

RESEARCH ARTICLE

and Vaid). Western feminism often centers middle-class white women, while Indian feminism engages with intersecting layers of oppression.

Unlike the West's institutionalized feminism, Indian feminism is deeply rooted in grassroots activism. Digital activism, however, is a common ground that is influencing both contexts today (Garrison; MeToo India).

Conclusion

The wave analogy serves as a valuable tool for understanding the historical development of feminism, but it is important to recognize that feminism is not a monolithic or linear movement. Both Western and Indian feminism have evolved in response to their unique historical, political, and social conditions. While Western feminism has been organized around distinct waves, Indian feminism has followed a more complex and fragmented trajectory, shaped by the unique challenges of caste, colonialism, and religious pluralism.

The feminist movement, whether in the West or in India, continues to evolve and adapt to new challenges. The ongoing struggle for gender equality is not bound by the confines of a single wave or phase but is a dynamic, multifaceted process that responds to the changing realities of women's lives across the globe.

References

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.

Garrison, Ednie Kaeh. "Contesting the Master Narrative: The History and Contemporary Politics of U.S. Feminism in the Context of Globalization." *Scholar & Feminist Online*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2006.

Government of India. *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, 1974–75*. Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, Department of Social Welfare, 1975.

Hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press, 1984.

India. Committe on the Status of Women in India. *Towards Equality Report*. New Delhi: Government of India, 1974.

Kinser, Amber E. "Negotiating Spaces for/through Third-Wave Feminism." *NWSA Journal*, vol. 16, no. 3, Fall 2004, pp. 124–153.

MeToo India. "#MeToo Movement in India: A Timeline of Events." *The Wire*, 12 Oct. 2018, https://thewire.in/women/metoo-india-timeline.

Peet, Richard. *Unholy Trinity: The IMF, World Bank and WTO*. Zed Books, 2003.

Sangari, Kumkum, and Sudesh Vaid, editors. *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. Rutgers University Press, 1989.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA). *SEWA Official Website*. https://www.sewa.org/. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

Walker, Rebecca. "Becoming the Third Wave." *Ms.* Magazine, Jan.–Feb. 1992, pp. 39–41.

Women and Child Development Ministry, Government of India. *National Policy for the Empowerment of Women*. 2001. https://wcd.nic.in/.